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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [IN](#)
SUBJECT: JAMMU AND KASHMIR: HIGH TURNOUT EXPECTED IN
OCTOBER ELECTIONS

Classified By: A/DCM John Davison for Reasons 1.4 (B and D)

11. (C) Summary: During a May visit to Jammu and Kashmir, Poloff learned that state assembly elections will be held in October, although the precise dates have not yet been announced. There was agreement among Poloff's interlocutors that the elections would see a record turnout barring a sustained and targeted increase in violence. The mainstream parties have begun their election campaigns in earnest, concentrating on the Jammu region where the battle appears to be wide open for any party willing to mount as effective campaign. The separatists represented by the All Party Hurriyat Conference will sit out the election but will not call for a boycott as they have in past elections. While GOI officials insist that the Indian state had learned from its mistakes and that it would ensure free, fair and transparent elections some political parties expressed worries. Their concerns were not about brazen stuffing of ballot boxes but more nuanced on-the-ground manipulation by local government officials to influence turnout at certain locations. The coming election is an important landmark for the GOI. Should it pull off a successful, high turnout election that is free of violence and seen as free and fair, its credibility with the Kashmiri people will be enhanced. A strong performance by the Congress Party may help slow the freefall in its political fortunes ahead of the national elections due within an year. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Poloff and PolFSN toured Jammu and Kashmir May 14-17 to meet with a cross-section of officials from the government, security agencies, separatists groups and mainstream political parties as well as journalists, academics and businessmen. There was broad agreement among the interlocutors on the current state-of-play in the political, economic and security environment in the state although there was disagreement on what the future holds and prescriptions for action. This cable discusses the dynamics of the election campaign in the run-up to state assembly polls in October. A separate cable reports on efforts to restore normalcy in the state.

State Assembly Elections in October

13. (SBU) While the precise dates for the elections have not been announced by the Election Commission of India, there was unanimity among the political players that the elections would begin after Eid, scheduled this year on October 3. As is normally the case in the state, they would be held over a few weeks in a staggered manner for security reasons. The elections would conclude and the results announced in time for the new state assembly to convene before its six year

term runs out on November 18.

Election Campaign: Record Turnout Expected

14. (C) Poloff/PolFSN interlocutors sensed an unexpectedly high level of interest among both voters and politicians in participating in the elections. They felt that, barring a sharp and sustained increase in violence, the turnout at the polls would be much higher than in 2002 and may approach India-wide averages. The campaigns of the principal mainstream parties have already begun in earnest, with party leaders criss-crossing the state to hold rallies and woo critical voting blocks. At a dinner hosted by Kashmiri Pandit businessman and school administrator Vijay Dhar, some attendees noted that there has been a deluge of aspiring candidates seeking party tickets. A senior police official at the gathering noted with satisfaction that "the more the merrier," pointing out that more candidates would lead to greater interest among the electorate and higher turnout on election day. Others noted that the mainstream political parties were today holding large election rallies in areas which were once terrorist strongholds and where there was virtually zero turn-out in past elections. One attendee joked that politicians who people thought were long dead were suddenly "emerging from the woodwork."

The Mainstream Parties: Coalition Politics

15. (SBU) The Congress Party leads the current state

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government in coalition with the Jammu and Kashmir People's Democratic Party (PDP). The Congress Party base is in the Hindu-dominated Jammu region, where it won 16 of its 20 seats in the 87 member assembly. The PDP, established in 1999, is a Muslim party with its base in the valley where it won most of its 16 seats. It is led by former Indian Home Affairs Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed and his daughter, Mehbooba Sayeed. The PDP espouses greater autonomy for Kashmir within India.

16. (SBU) The principal opposition party today is the National Conference (NC), which has dominated politics in the state since 1947, and which was the largest party in the assembly with 28 seats. It was led, until his death in 1982, by Sheikh Abdullah, one of the most important figures in the politics of contemporary Jammu and Kashmir. He was succeeded by his son, Dr. Farooq Abdullah, who together with his son, Omar Abdullah, still leads the party. The NC is principally a Muslim party with a strong base in the valley but good cross-over appeal in the Jammu region. Since its formation, the party has advocated greater autonomy for the state but within the Indian union. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the other national party, has pockets of strength in the Jammu region but suffered heavy losses in the 2002 election and has only one single seat in the assembly. The Jammu and Kashmir National Panthers Party is headed by Prof. Bhim Singh and has its base in the primarily Hindu Jammu. It advocates for a unified Jammu and Kashmir that included Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

17. (SBU) Poloff/PolFSN political interlocutors were in agreement that no single party would emerge with a majority on its own and the next Jammu and Kashmir government, like the current one, will also be a coalition between two of the three largest parties - the Congress Party, the PDP and the NC - with some help from smaller parties and independents. A hung assembly is viewed as favorable for the Congress Party which has the ideological space and voter-base compatibility to go with either the NC or the PDP, whichever offers a better deal. The NC and the PDP are unlikely to come together in a NC-PDB coalition because they compete for the same voter base - the predominantly Muslim vote in the valley.

Jammu: No Longer an Afterthought

¶18. (C) The conventional wisdom of political observers is that the NC and PDP would split the vote in the valley, with the NC narrowly ahead in the tally for the Kashmir region's 46 assembly seats. The focus, therefore, of the campaigns has been on the Jammu region, with its 37 assembly seats which are believed to be "up for grabs" by whichever party mounts the most effective campaign, according to PDP leader Altaf Bukhari. The Congress Party is trying to defend its base in Jammu, where it picked up 16 seats in 2002. Its incumbent Chief Minister, Ghulam Nabi Azad, is from the Jammu region and is sparing no effort to channel development funds, infrastructure projects and jobs into the region. As a result, the region is experiencing a major economic boom, even more robust than in the valley.

¶19. (C) The NC and PDP are making a concerted effort to build a presence in the Jammu region, concentrating on the predominantly Muslim districts of Poonch and Rajouri. The BJP, which has only one seat in the assembly, will try to make a comeback in its traditional support bases in the urban areas of Jammu. The Panther's Party will try to defend its pockets of strength in the rural areas of Udhampur in the Jammu region. The Jammu region is reveling in all this attention and believes it is finally achieving political parity with the valley, which has traditionally dominated the political discourse in the state.

Election Timing: Some Misgivings

¶10. (C) PDP President Mehbooba Sayeed was unhappy over the timing of the elections, saying that it will be difficult for Muslims to campaign during the Ramadan month of September. She also complained that the fruit harvest season, which falls in October, would depress voter turnout in the Muslim-dominated areas. She told Poloff that the PDP had

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advocated vigorously for August elections but PDP-coalition partner Congress Party had insisted on October. She accused the Congress Party's chief minister Ghulam Nabi Azad of manipulating the election dates to hurt the PDP, which is stronger in Muslim-dominated areas, and benefit the Congress Party which has greater following in the Hindu-dominated areas where September Ramadan and an October harvest do not have much of an impact on voter turnout or on campaigning. However, former state Education Minister Harshdev Singh, currently a Panther's Party member of the state assembly, criticized the holding of elections in October, noting that it was unsuitable for campaigning and polling in the Jammu region because the Hindu festivals of Diwali and Dussehra fall in that time frame.

The Separatists: Sitting it Out

¶11. (C) Mirwaiz Omar Farooq and Bilal Lone said that the All-Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) would neither participate nor oppose the forthcoming state assembly elections. It will not call for a boycott of elections as it did in 2002. The APHC, the Mirwaiz explained, views the election process as an administrative exercise that is distinct from the "core" Kashmir issue to which the Hurriyat is dedicated. According to him, the elections should be seen as a mechanism to put in place an apparatus to provide services such as health and education. It should not be mistakenly viewed as a step forward in resolving the underlying separatism issue. Yasin Malik told poloffs that he had not yet decided whether to participate in the elections although he was leaning against it. There is a degree of dissension in the APHC ranks, with some such as Sajjad Lone and many second-tier APHC members deciding to

participate directly or through proxies and others such as hardliner Syed Ali Gilani firmly opposed to participation. PDP's Altaf Bukhari suggested that the separatists were afraid to run in the elections because they would suffer humiliating losses.

Free and Fair Elections: Lessons from the Past

¶12. (C) Whether elections are fair is a topic that is always of great interest in Jammu and Kashmir, in part due to the legend that the rigging of the 1987 elections was the original sin that provoked the Kashmir conflict. While GOI officials insist that the Indian state had learned from its mistakes and that it would ensure free, fair and transparent elections, some political parties expressed worries. NC leader and former Minister Mustafa Kamal, whose brother Farooq Abdullah heads the NC and whose party was at the center of accusation of rigging in 1987, warned about attempts by GOI authorities to improperly influence the elections. He was not concerned about brazen acts such as stuffing of ballot boxes, which he felt was not possible in today's environment, but the more subtle use of government machinery to influence the results. For example, he noted, the security forces could affect turnout in selected neighborhoods by increasing or decreasing their concentration at these locations. Drawing attention to the statement of Pakistan-based Hizbul Mujahideen leader Syed Salahuddin that his organization would not disrupt the forthcoming election, Kamal said the Indian Army should match Salahuddin by pledging to withdraw completely to the barracks for the elections. He felt that the Central Reserve Police Force was adequate for maintaining peace during the elections.

¶13. (C) PDP President Mehbooba Sayeed accused her coalition partner, Congress Party's leader Ghulam Nabi Azad, of working to tilt the playing field against the PDP because he wanted to form the next government in coalition with the opposition NC. She, too, did not expect any heavy-handed interference by the government. She expressed confidence that the GOI in Delhi was sensitive to the perils of such meddling. She was concerned, however, that at the state and local level the Congress Chief Minister and his followers may take small decisions that are intended to influence results. As an example, Mehbooba pointed to the denial by the Jammu and Kashmir government of security cover for a politician who had defected to the PDP from the Congress Party and is slated to run on the PDP ticket in the coming elections. Such harassment, Mehbooba observed, deters the PDP from realizing

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its full support because it is seen as a signal that the Jammu and Kashmir government is prepared to victimize PDP supporters.

Ladakh: Still an Afterthought

¶14. (C) There is a pervasive and longstanding sentiment in Ladakh that the region and its people are shortchanged by being a part of Jammu and Kashmir. A breakaway Congress Party faction devoted to obtaining union territory status for the region has swept all elections in recent years. It has an overwhelming majority in the local government body, the lone Lok Sabha seat and both the assembly seats. In response to the Ladakhis' demand for autonomy, the GOI passed legislation in 1995 to create the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, which serves as local government body. Chairman of the Council Tsering Dorji complained that while the creation of the Council helped bring some self-governance to the region, it is still dependent on the Jammu and Kashmir government for much of its resources. With only two seats in the state assembly, Ladakh does not have the political clout to get its rightful share of the pie, he claimed. According to Dorji, the allocation for Ladakh should recognize the unique geography and culture of the region and be at least

partly related to the fact that Ladakh is bigger in area than the Jammu and the Kashmir regions combined. The only solution, according to him, is union territory status for the Ladakh, which will strengthen the region's ties to Delhi and snap the link with Srinagar.

¶15. (C) Thupstan Chhewang, Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) from Ladakh echoed Dorji, adding that the cultural, religious and geographic identity of Ladakh warrants its separation from Jammu and Kashmir. Former Lok Sabha member P. Namgyal, who lost the last election to Chhewang, also favors greater autonomy for Ladakh, but feels that separation and union territory status is something that the GOI will never agree to. Chhewang believes it is possible, particularly under a BJP government. Tsering outlined the efforts underway to bring roads, electricity and education to the remote communities of Ladakh, and discussed some of the unique challenges faced in a vast, sparsely populated region with its singular topography.

Comment: A Milestone Election

16: (C) Given the checkered history of assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir, the coming October poll represents an important landmark for both the Indian government and the extremists. Should the Indian government pull off a successful, high turn-out election that is free of violence and seen as free and fair, its credibility with the Kashmiri people will be enhanced. It will be able to argue with some justification that the elections are a demonstration that Kashmiris have a voice in their own affairs, they can get justice and fairness within the Indian system, and they have spoken in favor of the democratic process within the Indian union. A successful election would boost the process of healing and reconciliation that we have begun to see in the valley. For the same reasons, extremists committed to the cause of a liberated Kashmir will want low turn-out and disrupted elections.

¶17. (C) While it is impossible to predict the winners and losers in the October elections, it is safe to say that the NC, the PDP and the Congress Party will be the three largest groups in the assembly. There will also be many winners from the smaller parties and from among the independents. Whatever the nature and make-up of the coalition that takes office in this fractious political landscape, it is clear the Indian government will continue to pump funds into the state in an effort to influence the minds of the Kashmiri people if not their hearts. Even though Jammu and Kashmir is a special case and politics is not Indian mainstream, a strong performance by the Congress Party may help slow the freefall in its political fortunes which began to sputter in the fall of 2007 and then began to plummet as it suffered a succession of humbling state election losses, inflation soared and it was forced to raise oil prices. A poor performance in Jammu and Kashmir, however, would further underscore its waning political prospects ahead of the national elections due

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within an year.

¶18. (SBU) Interlocutors:

Muazamil Jalil, Indian Express
Kuldip Khoda, Director General of Police
Parvez Imroze, NGO Coalition of Civil Society
Parvez Khurram, NGO Coalition of Civil Society
Altaf Bukhari, Businessman and Treasurer of PDP
Vijay Dhar, Businessman, Educationist, Congress Party
Arun Chaudary, Joint Director, Intelligence Bureau
Yasin Malik, Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Force
Bilal Lone, Executive Member, All Party Hurriyat Conference
G.S. Mann, Agriculturist, Akali Dal
Riaz Shadad, Hotelier
Prof. Riaz Panjabi, Vice Chancellor, Kashmir University

Mirwaiz Omar Farooq, Chairman, All Party Hurriyat Conference
Yusuf Tarigami, MLA, Communist Party of India (Marxist)
Ashfaq Tramboo, Businessman
Mehbooba Sayeed, President PDP
Dr. Mustafa Kamal, MLA, National Conference
Dr. Ajay Chrungoo, President, Pannun Kashmir
[K. Rajendra Kumar](#), Inspector General of Police
Prof Amitabh Mattoo, Vice Chancellor, Jammu University
Arun Joshi, Hindustan Times
Harshdev Singh, MLA, Panthers Party
Luv Puri, The Hindu
Tsering Dorji, Chief Executive, Ladakh Autonomous Hill
Development Council
Thupstan Chhewang, Member Parliament, Independent
[P. Namgyal](#), MLC and Former Member of Parliament
S.R. Samuel, Senior Superintendent of Police
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